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Reading the Leaks

You can tell a lot about an administration by which news story becomes a "leak." The observation springs to mind from two of the past week's news stories, about the MIG-23s in Cuba and the CIA in Iran.

Last Sunday James Reston reported the administration's reaction to the news stories that the MIGs being sent to Cuba are ground-attack planes that can carry nuclear weapons, in violation of 1962 Soviet pledges not to base offensive nuclear weapons there. The administration has known about the MIGs for a year, he reported, and officials suggest that this somehow makes them OK. He continued:

"What has troubled the administration, however, is that the opponents of the strategic arms agreement, and particularly members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or their aides, have tried to use this MIG-23 deal as a propaganda weapon against a SALT II treaty with the Soviet Union."

In other words, the administration's problem is not with the Soviet Union sending MIGs to Cuba, but with the American people learning that it has done so. The administration would appear to have concluded that the MIGs are not relevant to the 1962 pledge or to SALT. The President indicated in his press conference yesterday that it is relying on Soviet promises not to ship nuclear weapons for the planes, but it is most doubtful that we can verify whether this has or will be done. In all probability the memo was leaked by someone disturbed at this decision. Yet now that the facts are out, the people and the Senate can

judge for themselves their relevance. In our view, the episode is exceedingly relevant to the kind of pledges we are likely to receive regarding Soviet use of their Backfire bomber, which is not counted in SALT though it can fly from the Soviet Union over the U.S. and land in Cuba.

Meanwhile, a Washington Post story by Don Oberdorfer carries the headline, "U.S. Makes Contacts With Shah's Foes." It describes "substantial and continuing contacts" with opponents to the Shah in recent weeks, "coming after years of minimal connections." In short, this leak describes what our intelligence agents are currently doing in the field. Even worse, it is bound to undercut our announced policy of supporting the Shah. It tends to legitimize the opposition and to suggest that the U.S. is hedging its bets against his overthrow. (Especially since a CIA agent sat in on the plotting of the generals who overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam in 1963.)

This especially destructive leak carries all the earmarks of bureaucratic infighting, since it comes in the context of badly mistaken CIA estimates of strength of the Shah's opposition. Perhaps the leak is intended to show that the CIA is shaping itself up; or perhaps it's intended to show that the President is cracking the whip to correct the deficiency. Either way, it's a small motive for the cost involved. We have no way to know whether the administration is worrying about the CIA-Iran leak the way Mr. Reston described it worrying about the MIG-Cuba leak. We hope it is, but without much expectation.